

Oral History Interview

with Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

July 24, 2008

Media and Public Affairs Building

by G. David Anderson, University Archivist and Historian

For the George Washington University Oral History Program

ANDERSON: Yeah, I know, this, even with you just watching yourself, I mean, retirement is not really retirement. Is it? [laughs]

TRACHTENBERG: Well, there are people who do retire, and there are an awful lot of people who have work they don't like. You know, the famous line about living lives of quiet desperation. And they have hobbies, and the hobbies is what fill their lives. And they just do the work to eat, pay the rent, and they can't wait until they reach 55, 60, 65, whatever, so they can devote themselves to things that give them satisfaction and pleasure. I never found that. So people say to me, "how could you be a university president for thirty years?" My answer is, "I loved every minute of it. Every day for thirty years." And frankly, I could have stayed another five. The question is therefore, if you retire, what do you want to do with yourself, and it wasn't sit on a deck and just smoke cigars, although I get pleasure from that from time to time. But rather, doing the teaching I'm doing, as you know, since August. It's not even a year yet. I've written a book. I've edited a book. And I've been doing a column for the *Chronicle on Higher Education* two or three days a week. And I've been doing consulting a day a week on average for Korn/Ferry, helping them to find new presidents and deans for other universities, and I've been speaking around the country. I don't want to keep up this pace, which is frankly, more hectic, I think, almost, than it was when I was president. Because you don't have as much as more support service, and there's just poor Helene and me. But, nor do I want to become somnambulant. I mean, I think it's important that a person stay intellectually engaged and physically active, post-normal retirement age. And anyhow, I like the idea of making a little money, because I want to give it away. I want to give some to my children, obviously, but also there are charities that I'm starting to support more robustly. I called Laurel Price the other day to get a roll up on my giving to GW, and she said, with some astonishment, "My goodness," she said, "I think you've given more than half a million dollars." And I said, "wow, I didn't realize that myself." She said, "well, you keep doing it. You know, as aggressively as you've been doing it, it mounts up."

ANDERSON: It does. So do the years. It really does.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeah.

ANDERSON: I guess you'll be in the top category before too much longer, right?

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: Well, I mean, you know, when I die, there's a bequest to GW, and if Francine and I and Adam and Ben, and then there's a whole list of subordinate relatives and stuff were all to go in one tragic event, the university would get my entire estate. They are my remainder man. So . . .

ANDERSON: We're all worth more after death than we are before death sometimes.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeah, I guess at least from a financial point of view. I like to think that we bring other things.

ANDERSON: Of course. Of course. Let me just jump in real fast and just say, this is an oral history interview with Dr. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, President Emeritus of the George Washington University. The interviewer is G. David Anderson. The interview is taking place in the Media and Public Affairs building in the office of President Trachtenberg. The date is Thursday, July the 24th, 2008. That's good for the transcriber. [laughs]

TRACHTENBERG: I understand.

ANDERSON: And us, when we go back. Because I transcribe some and Karen transcribes some.

TRACHTENBERG: Sure. I'm very grateful to her for it. And you of course, but to her, for her efforts.

ANDERSON: She tells me almost every time I bring her a new tape how much she's enjoying listening to these. [laughs] I mean repeatedly. I mean, not just once. I've heard it ten times.

TRACHTENBERG: I'm gratified. Thank you.

ANDERSON: To go back to 1995, as I mentioned before, one thing, there's some specific areas, when we finish the chronological look at your tenure here at George Washington University, such as fundraising-endowments, as one, buildings-facilities would be one, probably faculty and curriculum would be one, that we will explore a little more in depth just on those subjects. But in 1995 the Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Hall was dedicated.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: Now, this obviously is related to fundraising, because there was no money involved. What was your feeling or the university's feeling about naming something for a famous alumni, opposed to raising money to name a building?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, I think we put public notices on buildings for a variety of reasons. After all is said and done, George Washington didn't actually give us a gift to establish GW, although, you know, there is part of the urban myth about his will. But in fact there was no

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

money. And yet, we are delighted to have the name George Washington associated with the university, because of the greatness of the man. And the fact that he was the founding president of the university. But the more I read about him, the more I come to appreciate him, his values and his vision, his perspective on religion in America, for example. The famous letter to the congregation, Touro Synagogue, in Providence, Rhode Island. The fact that he freed his slaves in his will, upon his death. I mean, the man has lots of things to recommend him, and we're glad to have his name on the university. Likewise, my efforts at the university, in part had to do with raising people's pride of place. And one of the things I was keen to do was associate the university properly with accomplished individuals who had an affiliation with the institution.

So one of the buildings, which was named Everglades, which happened to be the name on the building which was an apartment house, which the university purchased, and which we left the name Everglades on. We're not Florida. We have no relationship to Everglades. We don't have any interest in swamps. There was no reason to have that building named Everglades. And it was a residence hall. And so I named it Fulbright Hall, after J. William Fulbright, a distinguished American senator, a former university president, and a graduate of George Washington University Law School, a faculty member for a brief time at GW Law School, and somebody who was so accomplished that having his name on a building on the campus, which honored him, I'd like to believe, but also reflected well on the institution.

Likewise, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, who was, after all, a graduate of GW, although a transfer student from Vassar, but nevertheless received her bachelor's degree from GW, and was proud enough of it, and first lady of the United States. So what these names on facilities do, and there's a Colin Powell room, what they do is say to current students and to the future generations, this is a place where accomplishment begins, and you, by coming and associating yourself with the institution, doing a degree here, you can aspire to the kinds of accomplishment, the kinds of things that these other graduates who preceded you did. Other halls, other facilities, are named for benefactors, and that's no trivial thing either. And you need a balance.

ANDERSON: One thing about, that I've learned through the years working with development, I know that the university, if you name a building, if you ever name a building after yourself, or a room, or something of this nature, if the room is torn down and a new building is built up, they can basically take the name off, put up a plaque somewhere and name it another name. Has this ever caused any discontentment with donors in that capacity?

TRACHTENBERG: We haven't done that very much. Generally what we do is if we're putting up a new facility, we try to give the name prominence in some other location. So, when we tore down, for example, GW hospital, we assembled all the plaques that that been in rooms going back to the day and remounted them in different places in the new hospital. So we try to maintain a continuing integrity of tradition. But I know of other institutions where they, after some period, they don't worry a lot if the name lapses. In my own undergraduate alma mater, Columbia, a building that I was looking for the last time I was on campus, called Johnson Hall, when I was a student, I couldn't find Johnson Hall despite my best efforts, and that's because, at some point, it fell into disrepair, and the university got a

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

gift from a man named Greene, and they renamed it Greene Hall. I myself would have made it Johnson Greene Hall, or something like that, so that one is not disrespectful to Mr. Johnson, who I think was a president of Columbia back in the day. At any rate, I think if it's possible to keep faith with the past, you do it.

ANDERSON: Well, we, as I said, as I mentioned before, we'll be getting into fundraising as a very specific topic, but also, in 1995, Mrs. Dorothy Shapiro, I know, gave a rather large gift to the law school. And, was this a, were you working directly with Mrs. Shapiro in this respect?

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, yes. I had made friends with a lawyer here in town who was her attorney, and he himself was a Cornell graduate. She herself was not a graduate of any college or university. She was a widow and was thinking of making some gifts from her husband's estate. He tried very hard to get her to give the gifts to Cornell. She is a very strong-minded woman, still alive and well, I'm pleased to say, and knows her mind. And she said, "No, no, this money was made here in Washington and it ought to be invested for the betterment of the place where it was earned." And so he introduced her to me with that instruction, and I worked with her subsequently for oh, probably, fifteen, eighteen years. And she made a series of benefactions. There are multiple funds and scholarships and programs established by Dorothy Shapiro or the foundation that she directed.

ANDERSON: Also in '95, you and Vice-presidents Katz and Bob Chernak cut the ribbon on J Street, which was a totally divergent move here at GW. It's been my experience since the opening of J Street, since I've been here, you know, twenty plus years, I guess, it's probably one of the most remodeled areas in the university. What was the original contention of creating a food court, basically, what it adds up to?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, on the basis of

ANDERSON: And why J Street?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, on the basis of advice we got from consumers, students who ate in the facility, we were led to believe that that was what they wanted. Students tend to change generationally every several years in universities, and different sets of students over time had different notions about the environment and the programs they wanted to take their meals under. And we tried to keep up with them. Actually amortizing our investments from renovation to renovation, we hoped, but basically to keep a fresh new look in that facility, which is so public and so consequential to undergraduate life. Also other campus life, and other constituencies on a regular basis. It's sort of like the front room of the institution. It's hard for somebody to visit the campus without going there. So that's the answer why we renovated it so frequently. What was your other question?

ANDERSON: J Street, which is . . .

TRACHTENBERG: Ah, we were just being cute, of course. You know, there's the famous story about why there is no J Street in Washington. And so that left the room, the name

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

available, and we wanted to give it a cute name, and something that was easy to remember. And we got the city council, actually, to pass a resolution

ANDERSON: We have that resolution.

TRACHTENBERG: Saying that we could name it J Street, celebrating the occasion. But it was just, you know, it's like a lot of other things. I believe universities tend to take themselves too seriously, and so you'll find slightly tongue in cheek names on facilities we have around the campus. They're easy to remember. They become part of the undergraduate narrative. So, Ivory Tower is the name of one of our residence halls and City Hall is a name of one of our residence halls. And these are obviously named to be a little clever.

ANDERSON: Well, I can speak for myself that this philosophy has obviously worked very well, because I get questions quite often about J Street, why J Street, and the whole deal, as I do about the hippo, and the famous water horses, and the different names around. So I figure those add some, I think it adds a lot to it, to the campus as a whole. If it's not hopelessly overdone.

TRACHTENBERG: That's right. I mean, you know, you have to get, every once in a while I need an adult to take me aside and say "no no, that's over the top". But I do think that institutions need to build tradition. And we were a university that did not pay a great deal of attention to building that sort of tradition. We were very much a bread and butter, black and white kind of place back in the day. And when I got here, I thought adding a little sizzle to the steak would enhance its attractiveness.

ANDERSON: Oh, without a doubt. As I mentioned before, when I first got to GW, I felt like, it felt sterile. That's the only word I can use. It was just buildings and buildings, roads, roads. And that was about it. I actually appeared, I was actually on the beautification committee meeting. I will tell you a very funny, quickly, without taking very much time. I was at the faculty club one day, the old faculty club, before the new one was built, and I looked at my watch, and I just kind of jumped up and said I was late for a beautification meeting, and the faculty member across the hall looked at me very strangely and I asked him what was wrong. And he said, "did you say a beatification committee meeting?"

TRACHTENBERG: [Laughs]

ANDERSON: So, I've never forgotten that.

TRACHTENBERG: That's very excellent...

ANDERSON: It is. Going on those same lines. The relevance of the 175th anniversary. 175th is usually not celebrated as much, obviously, as 150 or 200 or 100, or things of this nature. But I believe you said in one of your statements that, "it's all we have at the moment, so let's do the most we can with it."

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: That's right. I mean, I'm a great believer in using what you've got. And 175th isn't 200, but I wasn't likely to be around for the 200th anniversary, and I'd missed the 150th, so I had to use, you know, do what I could with the opportunity that was presented. And it was important at two levels. One, we need to underline always to our stakeholders that we are a venerable institution, that we are one of the older institutions of higher education in the United States, rooted and traditional and entitled to some respect for that. Secondly, it was a way of saying without being too aggressive to our neighbors in Foggy Bottom, that we weren't transients in Washington, and that when they made observations about the institution, they needed to keep in mind that we had been founded in 1821 and that we had been in Foggy Bottom since 1912. And since every now and again somebody would complain about the fact that the university was located in Foggy Bottom, I thought it was important to make the point without, as I say, being nasty about it, that, since we had been here since 1912, we probably had been here since before they were born, and that the likelihood therefore was, that they had moved in adjacent to a university, a university in place and in operation, and for them to later complain about the fact that there was some activity associated conventionally with universities, like students in the street or faculty or traffic, was inappropriate. They knew they had notice of that before they came in. I'm almost reminded of people who buy a house and they get a good price on it because it's adjacent to an airport. And then after they move in, they complain of the fact that there are planes flying overhead. I guess it's human nature, but that doesn't mean that you can't point it out to people. And one way of pointing it out was through celebrating the 175th anniversary of our location in the city.

ANDERSON: Well, I had received more than one, had heard more than one statement that a lot of the local individuals, community individuals, thought that we were founded in 1912, since we moved here in 1912. It was their whole conception. And I heard that from at least five or six different residents. So that really amplifies what you're saying, on this nature. But the . . .

TRACHTENBERG: We moved here from College Hill.

ANDERSON: Well, actually from the other side of the White House. This was the third move.

TRACHTENBERG: Is that right? I thought it was the second.

ANDERSON: We originally started on College Hill and in 1880s moved to between H and I and 14th and 15th on the other side of the White House,

TRACHTENBERG: Ah hah.

ANDERSON: And then we had eight buildings over there.

TRACHTENBERG: That's where the medical center was.

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

ANDERSON: Well, the medical center was on E street originally, and then on H street for about seventy-five years. But it was separate from the school, the university.

TRACHTENBERG: I see. I see.

ANDERSON: But the university had about eight buildings on the other side of the White House; in 1912, decided to move here. They had planned a really big phenomenal campus down on the mall, which never materialized. But it's really interesting, you know, that we've always been in the District. I often ask students the question that we've always been in the District of Columbia but we haven't always been in Washington, and see if they can figure that one out.

TRACHTENBERG: Right. Right.

ANDERSON: But, what about the, I understand the rationale of the 175th, but the organization, I know there were multiple multiple committees that started in 1995 and evolved from that point. Did you turn that over to, like, Bob Chernak or someone else to organize all the . . .

TRACHTENBERG: I think Mike Freedman did it.

ANDERSON: Oh, Freedman did it?

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, the idea was to bring faculty in so there were lectures and published some scholarly collections and essays and we had concerts and public events and we held, and we used 175th logo on our publications and we put flags on the light posts that indicated that it was 175th, so we did everything that we could to communicate the facts.

ANDERSON: Did you have any idea, [laughs] the aspect of how the hippo was purchased is very well known. We've discussed it already.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: Several times. Any conception of how that was going to take off? [laughs]

TRACHTENBERG: No, no, no. It was

ANDERSON: Phenomenal is the word I would use.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. I think it, I mean it's fun that it stuck. I had not reason to believe it would be as successful as it has. And you'll remember there was a bumpy start. There were a small group of dissident students who were concerned that perhaps institutional funds rather than my own had paid for the hippo, and was this a proper use of tuition money, and it became the focus, briefly, for some modest disputations. Students said, what was it, books, what was it, we should spend the money on more books, not on ornamentations of this sort, but this is not an uncommon reaction on a campus, and then once that brief moment of

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

unhappiness passes, people allow themselves to sit back and say, “well, you know, on reflection, this isn’t the worst thing in the world, and then the following year, of course, the hippo was always there when the freshmen arrived, and so it became part of the legacy of the institution.

ANDERSON: I know it’s become an incredibly, it’s become a second mascot. And looks like it will continue to be a second mascot. They are reforming George One’s head again. Heads are remade about every; it’s not that, it’s not that, I read an article on that that it’s been, you know, it’s about the third or forth time it’s been redone. The hippo will probably stay the same as it goes along through the years. What was the, I know that part of the celebration was going down to Mt. Vernon. What were your impressions of that particular trip, going down there, and seeing Mt. Vernon, and of course George Washington. I think you sailed down the Potomac.

TRACHTENBERG: That’s right.

ANDERSON: If I’m not mistaken.

TRACHTENBERG: That’s right. Well, I loved it. I thought it was a wonderful thing. We took, there were large groups of students, and it’s always fun to visit Mt. Vernon. The director is a GW Ph.D. in history, and so there are good relationships. And in fact, one of the busts of George Washington was given to Mt. Vernon as a gift from the trustees of George Washington University, with my urging, and it is sited in front of the new auditorium there, named after GW trustee and Mt. Vernon benefactor, Robert Smith. So there’s a lot of ties between GW and Mt. Vernon, as there should be. And a lot of our graduates who have degrees in museum studies have worked there, and doctoral candidates in history have gone there and used their facilities and their files and their libraries. It is a beautiful facility, and approaching it by boat up the Potomac is very special, and going with a group of students, and so the trip was fun and the destination was fun. And a very happy occasion for all. An appropriate part of a 175th anniversary.

ANDERSON: Have you been to the new museum at Mt. Vernon?

TRACHTENBERG: I haven’t yet. It’s one of the things I have on my to do list, I guess what they call now “bucket list.” You want to do it before you kick the bucket.

ANDERSON: Exactly.

TRACHTENBERG: I just did one thing the other day. I gave a commencement address in Albany, New York to a place called Excelsior College, and subsequently went and spent the weekend in Cooperstown and made it to the Baseball Hall of Fame. So I’ve checked that off my to do list.

ANDERSON: I have the same list of things to do before I leave. And one of them, of course, is to see, to hear a Supreme Court argument. And I’ve noticed that, you have your Supreme Court of the United States. Did you ever argue before the Supreme Court or . . .?

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: No, but I did have my name on a brief that appeared before the Supreme Court, and a court of appeals judge, John Newman, of Connecticut, second appellate division, once said to me, “you know,” he said, “I saw a citation to a Stephen Joel Trachtenberg the other day on a Supreme Court case.” He said “are you aware of it?” I said “yes, it’s me.” He seemed astounded. But as you know, I didn’t practice for very long. But I did sign and participate in one Supreme Court appeal.

ANDERSON: I know there have been quite a few alums in the law school that have argued, or have been certified.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Sure.

ANDERSON: Something that really stands out as far as our law school alumni is concerned. In ’96, Odessa State Medical in Ukraine actually gave you an honorary doctorate of Medicine, which I’m not sure you probably had received before, a medical doctorate.

TRACHTENBERG: You’re not allowed, technically, under the U.S. rules. In the United States, the intercollegiate rules are that no honorary degrees that can, no honorary degrees are to be given which are identical to degrees that can be earned. And so you’ll notice that when somebody gets an honorary doctorate of laws, they get an LLD, which is an honorary degree, and the earned degrees in law are JD, LLM and JSD, Doctorate of Juridical Sciences. There is no earned LLD. Likewise, you cannot in the United States give an honorary MD. There are a variety of honorary degrees that we give to scientists and medical personnel, but not an MD. So, to get an honorary MD is a rare thing, and as you point out, it took place in the Ukraine, where they obviously have different rules.

ANDERSON: Well, I was fascinated, that’s one thing that caught my eye, because I knew a little bit about what you were describing, but not all the background on degrees, and when I saw doctor of medicine, it did peak my interest, to say the least.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, I wish my mother had been alive. She would have been thrilled.

ANDERSON: Do you ever, do you, have you ever compiled lists of honorary degrees that you’ve been given over the years?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, you know, they keep, I myself, not, but they keep putting them in the GW Bulletin after my name. Judy Arkus maintains, who publishes, is the editor of the catalogue, does that. And so it’s possible to go research it. And so I try to keep her apprized when I earn an honorary degree since she’s sort of the keeper of the files on that. But I don’t spend much time worrying about it.

ANDERSON: That’s interesting. I’ll have to do a compilation in the Encyclopedia.

TRACHTENBERG: The honorary degrees that matter in your life are the first couple you get, because it’s kind of exciting. With the passage of time, as you get more of them, unless

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

you're in some sort of a footrace with Woodrow Wilson, who apparently accumulated well over a hundred, or Father Healey or other, you know, distinguished academics who accumulated many of them. Theodore Hessburg of Notre Dame apparently has 150, maybe more. I never worried about that. It seems to me, after you get some number, the term marginal utility comes to mind, and I stopped accepting them, unless I got them at the invitation of a friend or from an institution that particularly mattered to me. For example, it was nice to get a degree from the University of Hartford, where I served as president. It was nice to get an honorary degree from George Washington University, where I served as president. The one that really touched me was the Columbia degree, and that was because that's where I did my undergraduate education, and while I was being awarded the degree, I couldn't help my mind run back to the day when I first arrived on campus, right out of secondary school. Who would have thought, was, you know, my reaction when I was getting the honorary degree. Who would have thought, in 1955, that all these years later I would be getting an honorary doctorate from my alma mater. And so that's particularly touching and moving, and makes a difference.

ANDERSON: What was your involvement with the inauguration of the GW Laureate Lecture Series, because I know the Nobel Prize winner, Leon Max Lenderman was the first to work with that.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, again, you know, we are always trying to associate ourselves with greatness. And we're trying to hold up as examples to our students people who have devoted their lives to values and ideas and things that we think are estimable and virtuous, and that they should aspire to. And so, our interest in having Nobel Prize winners visit the campus and speak is meant to be laudatory of them, of course, but also of what they stand for, and what we hope to stand for, and what we hope our faculty and our students believe in. Which is scholarship and learning and teaching and research and new ideas and all the things that the Nobel Prize has come to represent. And so, creating the program was an effort in that direction.

ANDERSON: Well, something that I have been involved with, the Judaica collection, the Kiev Collection

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: Originally, it was your instigation that actually first obtained this. This is kind of two-part question. One is the description of how this came about, with Rabbi Kiev's children, and secondly, you know, how much effort or time do you take when you, to obtain collections like this for the library, as opposed to fundraising and speaking and so forth, that would be more of a normal course of events?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, you don't get a chance like this very often. When you get an institution-changing opportunity, the Kiev collection was a unique resource. I was introduced to Dr. Kiev by mutual associates and learned that his father, Rabbi Kiev, who had been the librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, had developed a collection of books, of his own, personal private property, which were represented, volumes

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

were represented in JTS in their library, and these were duplicates, or books that he had come on randomly in his private capacity. And the family had, upon his death, stored all these books in a basement, and I thought this was a terrible tragedy, that these books were not being available to scholars and students, and the question then, where ought Dr. Kiev locate them? And he had a variety of alternatives. He thought about Brandeis and he thought about the universities in New York, where, he lives in that area. And I said, “look, New York has Jewish Theological Seminary. New York has Columbia. New York has NYU. New York has the New York Public Library. And all of these facilities have extensive Judaica collections. GW is located in the nation’s capital. What an appropriate place for this collection, where it would serve, not only our university, but Catholic University and Georgetown and the others, and where it would add value to an institution that is aspiring and moving up, and we’re becoming a destination library, and where we would commit to hosting it in the appropriate manner and building a space for it and getting it staffed out, and we would add to it all the time ourselves.

And so that was a winning argument ultimately, and both Dr. Kiev and his wife, who played a very vigorous role in the collection of books. She deserves to be applauded, Phyllis, in her own right. Ultimately, he saw the virtue of putting the collection at GW. It didn’t happen overnight. I mean, there was a lot of talk and a lot of commitment by the university to make it happen. But what it gives you is, between the Library of Congress and GW, and there’s a very good collection at the University of Maryland, this is a wonderful area for somebody who is a scholar in those disciplines to do their work.

And so, there are times when bringing some resource to a university that is not strong but hopes to be in an area, is more beneficial than adding it to an institution that already has a deep resource. It’s like money. If you give a hundred million dollars to GW, it has the potential to be transformative in some way. Whereas if you give a hundred million dollars to Harvard, it disappears into a forty-million dollar endowment. I don’t want to argue that it won’t have an effect, but it surely won’t have the resonance that it would have here, and so, there is, I think, a plausible case that you have a greater impact, you do more good, by giving your hundred million dollars, or your million dollars to GW than you do to Harvard, which one could say has sufficient.

ANDERSON: I know you were also given a B’nai B’rith humanitarian award the same year, ’96. ’96 seems to be somewhat of monumental year in a lot of respects. I know that your activity within the Jewish community, activity within communities that deal with Christians and Jews and Muslims and Jews is well known. I think it’s been very well documented. Did you ever feel any restraints as far as either the Jewish community here, or Hillel specifically, as to just how involved you could get with Hillel, or would there be problems that would be reflected because of that?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, the problem is, I think for a university president, is time. You just don’t have enough time to do all the things you’d like to do. But for example, although I was a member, and am a member of Adas Israel, which is a Jewish conservative congregation here in Washington, and I believe, arguably the oldest congregation in the District of Columbia, although Washington Hebrew is also venerable. I made it my practice in the last

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

few years to attend services at Hillel because I thought it was important for Jewish students and indeed for students in general to understand that the president was a person of faith, and was going to services, and they were enhanced and cheered by seeing the president coming to such activities. Whereas going to services to Adas, which I would do during the year, well, you know, they went about their lives. Nobody thought too much, maybe modest celebrity, but you know, it wasn't a big deal. I've just written a piece last night for a new Jewish student magazine in which I, to be starting here in the fall, 2008, in which I talk about the difference between being a Jewish president and a president who is a Jew.

And I said, look, I said, you know, there are four thousand universities in America, and while there are some that are religiously based, and so obviously, the president of Georgetown is Catholic, though the president may be Jesuit or not, but it's not uncommon to have a cleric. And similarly, at Yeshiva University, where it's not uncommon to have a rabbi, but any case, a pious and observant Jew. Most of the institutions are secular and so the president may be secular, may belong to a religion, may be faith observant, but the point is that that should not drive your professional work and your role. You are first and foremost the president of the institution. You are not a Jewish president.

You are a president who happens to be Jewish, and your successor may be Protestant, may be secular, may be agnostic. It's not pertinent. Now, having said that, I also think that we are all carrying baggage. We grew up in a tradition. That tradition informs our thinking. It helps us, it helps to craft who we are as people, our values. And so I grew up within the Abrahamic tradition, and to some extent therefore, the values of charity and humanity and brotherhood are part of what I believe in and am committed to, and therefore, I have worked very hard at creating amity on the campus and understanding between the religions, and inducing and working with Jewish students to host Islamic students and Christian students, particularly, at events that break a fast during the, the Iftars that break the fast during Ramadan. And I think that doing things like this is good for the students, good for the campus. It gives us outreach to the Islamic, the ambassadors from the Islamic nations, the Israeli ambassador and particularly in these contentious and difficult times, it anticipates the possibility of problems. So that if Jewish students and Christian students and Islamic students have celebrated together and have eaten together, it's harder for them to be judgmental about each other if some issue comes up.

ANDERSON: I think that philosophy has been somewhat self-fulfilling, because I think GW has obtained that status, where people know each other.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, we've been very fortunate. We've been very fortunate. Where many other campuses have had races issues and religious conflicts and political conflicts between Palestinian students and Israeli students or whatever, we have been very blessed to have avoided those things. Listen, you never know and you never can get smug. Any time, something terrible can happen on a campus, but it doesn't hurt to try and be prepared all the time.

ANDERSON: Also, in '96, Dr. French, Rod French, left as Academic Vice President and Don Lehman was hired. And I was interested in that process, since Don, I happen to know

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

Dr. Lehman fairly well, and, he was a faculty member here. He becomes Vice President of Academic Affairs. Could you discuss some of the things on Dr. French leaving and Dr. Lehman coming in, since that's one of the major major posts here at the university.

TRACHTENBERG: French had done it for some considerable time. Initially, he had decided he wanted to do something else. He wasn't quite sure what. But he wanted more time to himself. And so he stepped out, not only, he stepped out from that job. He did some teaching for a while. And then he had an opportunity to help build a university in Sharjah. And it had the virtue of a brand new challenge, and an opportunity for him to earn some serious money, which he earned abroad, and so he had the benefit of generous lenient tax laws, and allowed him to run up, frankly, an estate which I think he looks forward to, in due course, leaving to his progeny, as do we all. I don't think any of us in academia expect to get genuinely rich. But we do want our children to, as I think all parents do, be a little better endowed than we ourselves were. And to have choices that we don't have. And I think grandparents like the idea of being able to help out with the tuitions of their grandchildren, help put their children through college and university, help to assist their children in buying their first home. I would despair at the thought of leaving my children so much money that they didn't have to work. But I like the idea of leaving my children a little money so that they can work at professions and careers of public service, or teaching, or other kinds of endeavors that don't necessarily pay well monetarily . . .

End of side 1

Side 2

TRACHTENBERG: who had the blessing. And it really is a blessing to graduate from college and graduate school and law school without any debt. After working for two years with a big Wall Street law firm, and paying off the debt that his wife had accumulated going to graduate school, he said to me, "listen, I'm not having as much fun doing this, and I don't feel as fulfilled professionally as I thought I would, and I think I want to become an academic. And he took a dramatic cut in pay, about two thirds, to become a professor. And he's just begun, recently, within the weeks, as a professor at Brooklyn Law School. And I'm thrilled that he could do that, because I was able to get him through his own education without leaving him burdened with lots of debts. So, I think Rod saw an opportunity and he went off and did that for a number of years and made a real contribution to Sharjah and to building that university, and now I think he is in fact actually retired.

ANDERSON: He's back in the Washington D.C. area now.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, yes.

ANDERSON: But he left of his own volition in that respect.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

ANDERSON: Did, how, what was the process for searching for a new academic vice president? As I mentioned before, outside of yourself, that's probably one of the key positions at the university.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. Yes. Well, that's a complicated story. I can tell you the story, but if I do that, then when I sign this use release, I'm going to have to be a little more careful about it than I would be otherwise. We did a search. It had all of the trappings of a search. A search committee. Advertisements. Reaching out to the campus. Reaching out to people all over. And Rod left, and we needed an interim. And we added Professor Salamon, who was at the time dean of Arts and Sciences.

ANDERSON: The graduate school, I believe.

TRACHTENBERG: No. No. She was the dean of the . . .

ANDERSON: Oh, Salamon. Linda Salamon.

TRACHTENBERG: Linda Salamon. Yes. Yes.

ANDERSON: Excuse me.

TRACHTENBERG: Not Henry. Linda Salamon.

ANDERSON: Right.

TRACHTENBERG: Linda Salamon. And, so she came up to be the interim vice-president, but we left the deanship unfilled. Also put an interim person in. Because we wanted there to be an understanding that if Dean Salamon did not become Vice-President Salomon, we still wanted her as part of the team, and we wanted her as dean of arts and sciences. Which is, I think, one of the most important jobs in the university. There was a competition. There were candidates from all over. Dean Salamon was a strong contender, and it looked like she was going to get the job. When, out of left field, the then provost of Johns Hopkins, a man by the name of Joseph Cooper, stepped forward and indicated that he was not comfortable with the then new president at Johns Hopkins, and he was interested in relocating from Baltimore to Washington and perhaps taking on the vice-president for academic affairs job here.

I knew Cooper. He has been one of my professors at Harvard when I was a graduate student at Harvard. And he was a very able, very thoughtful, very competent man, brought many of the skills that I thought we needed, and brought a fresh perspective. New eyes, traditions that were different. Had not grown up in the GW hothouse, which gave you value, but extracted a price for it. It made you a little more parochial. A little more limited. So, I think the committee and I and everybody involved concluded that Cooper ought to get the job. And so we offered him the job, but did not conclude the transaction. We were in conversation with him about the terms and conditions of his appointment. Vice-President Salamon, hearing about this, took offense. And felt that we had not been as true to her as she thought we should have been. She believed, I think from the outset, that she was going to be the beneficiary of

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

the job. She was going to get the job. And that the search process was more dramatic and symbolic than real.

And as I say, she was the leading contender and before Cooper entered the search, I fully expected she would win. She then withdrew, and she withdrew in a strongly worded message. And she's a woman of forceful words and opinions. Very smart. And she withdrew in a way that slammed the door, which made it very hard to go back to her. As it turns out, had she been patient, she would have in fact gotten the job. Because Cooper had second doubts. It turns out that his wife was very happy in Baltimore, thought he was of an age where he had proved whatever it was he had to prove as an administrator. He had been dean at Rice. He had been provost at Johns Hopkins. And perhaps, had he been going to a presidency, she would have gone along with it. But since he was going to a vice-presidency, which she saw as a lateral, and moreover at GW rather than at Harvard, or something, or Princeton, she persuaded him that he ought to step down. Not take the job. And after an extensive negotiation, in which we met his terms in every possible way, he ultimately withdrew as a candidate.

And it was a great disappointment to me, because I expected more of him. And particularly since we had a past relationship. I thought he could speak candidly to me and I would have been happy to go talk to his wife. We offered to, I mean, we offered to have him stay living in Baltimore. And I said as part of the appointment, I would hire a car and driver to bring him from Baltimore to Washington every day, give him an apartment here in Foggy Bottom in case he had to stay overnight. We tried every conceivable inducement. It didn't work out. It didn't work out. When he and I couldn't come to terms, I hired an attorney, Ray Cotton, to serve as an intermediary, with the thought that Cotton might be able to work out a deal. We couldn't work it out. We couldn't work it out. And that's too bad. Because I think, except for the place where he was in his life, he's obviously a very talented, very bright, very capable academic and a good academic administrator. Didn't work out. I turned around to discover that Linda Salamon had combusted. Otherwise, she would have been asked to do the job. But, impatient, and as I say, a little volatile. She had walked away in a huff, which I've always felt bad. And never been able to talk it through with her, because she gets, she gets, she's still huffy about it.

ANDERSON: I knew Linda Salamon.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeah. She, I, you know, I think she got judgmental and she felt I didn't have enough confidence in her. I had sufficient confidence in her. You don't, it's not that you don't love her. It's that Cooper actually would have been an even better appointment. In any case, the clock was ticking. We needed to make an appointment. Don was interested in the job, committed to the job. He was one of the faculty. The faculty wanted to move it along. I found him a charming and forthright, nice man. And I made a judgment, for better or worse, that it was more important to fill the job with somebody good enough and somebody likeable, and somebody that the faculty respected because they knew him, than to go another year and do another search and delay the process on the possibility that you were going to do better. And so he got the job. And he's done a good job.

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

ANDERSON: So he was basically the selection of not just yourself but the committee, the whole committee that was

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. You never do these things, particularly an academic appointment, you never do these things in isolation. You always have to bring the faculty along. I mean, they do add value. But even if they didn't add value, you would have to be a political naïve not to recognize the need to have faculty fingerprints on decisions about appointments in which the faculty think they have standing. And you need to work with these traditions.

ANDERSON: There must be something about being provost at Johns Hopkins because it's obviously had a big effect on the university. I mean, the current president.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeah, I think that's accidental.

ANDERSON: I'm sure it is. But I mean, Johns Hopkins had a reputation that almost anyone that is in a very high post would be thought fairly well of in that respect.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, it's a fine university. Whether it's the right place to train people for other institutions and what sorts of other institutions and such, I think is complicated. For example; let's set Johns Hopkins aside. Let's talk about Princeton or Harvard. I think institutions that bring to their jobs, administrators from Princeton and Harvard need to understand that these people had trained in a resource rich environment and they have habits that they have to overcome. In working in an institution where you cannot make casual assumptions about the capacity of the university to write out checks or to invest money. University presidents generally do not get to choose between good and bad decisions. Deans, vice presidents, sort out the bad decisions before they ever get to your desk. When you get to be president, you are always choosing between multiple good decisions, all of which cost money, and you have to decide, given limited resources, which options you're going to invest in and which you're going to leave on the table. And inevitably, the ones you leave on the table are perfectly fine. And people think to themselves, "what a fool Trachtenberg is," that he didn't do this wonderful thing." Well, it wasn't out of foolishness. It was out of limited resources. So, if you're coming from an institution that measures its endowment in billions of dollars, you have the freedom to make more choices than you do if you come from an institution that's more restricted. Training in an institution that has more restricted resources may in some ways prepare you better than coming through some place where that experience is less likely. But that's not conventionally thought of.

ANDERSON: Let me end up 1996 and today's interview. '96 was also the year that the students won the national solar car competition. Did you have a chance to see the solar car, or even go to the competition?

TRACHTENBERG: I didn't go to the competition. It was out some place in California.

ANDERSON: That was quite an honor, actually.

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, it was very nice. And I did see the car because I had to find space for them to build it. And of course, in Foggy Bottom, that was daunting. And we had them constructing it in a garage, one of the parking garages. We roped off some space. That's where they worked. And then of course they spent money that we didn't have and that they didn't have. They created a budget, a problem to the School of Engineering, and I had to help bail them out. Raise money to help pay for it. It's interesting. I find myself talking to you about money all the time. And I realize that the mother's milk of academic and university excellence turns out to be money. Coming up with interesting ideas, it's all about competitions. New Libraries, various programs, scholarships, better faculty salaries. These do not require genius. And to the extent that a university president is short in that regard, there are plenty of people happy to help to bring you ideas. It is the paying for making ideas happen that calls for energy and wit in university presidents. And therein lies the challenge. I once had a student comment that he thought the president of Harvard ought to be paid more than the president of GW. And I said "quite the contrary." This is a much harder job than being president of Harvard, where you almost never have to really chose where you can almost pay for anything you can think of. I'm always astounded, for example, when there are issues at Harvard, contentious issues over the compensation of maintenance personnel or kitchen workers. And I think to myself, why don't they simply pay these people as generously as the market permits? At GW, our kitchen workers are not paid enviable salaries, and I don't propose to become a kitchen worker and I don't want to be patronizing about this. But, we pay as high a kitchen worker compensation as anybody based in the District of Columbia. We do not allow our kitchen workers to go without pay and whatever benefits comes with those jobs. Any place else in the District of Columbia. So, we are very interested in the marketplace. And while we have the occasional labor problems, basically in twenty years here, I think they've been relatively modest because we try to anticipate and do the right thing. So the question is, if you had forty billion dollars, why wouldn't you make the market in Boston? Or Cambridge? Well, you would, I think, if you were sensible. You'd have a reputation of being a generous, you'd have people fighting to get jobs, to work on the staff at Harvard. The point being that to the extent that university presidents are openhanded, to the extent that they are accommodating to staff, to faculty, to students, a lot of it goes back to having the ability to do it. Having the resources. And people who believe that it is out of meanness of spirit or out of parsimoniousness that universities don't pay more to adjunct faculty or whatever, simply don't recognize that most of us are dancing as fast as we can.

ANDERSON: Well, thank you very much. I've learned so much from these interviews.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, thank you.

ANDERSON: And I want to thank you again. We'll conclude

TRACHTENBERG: I have been more candid, David, than I, you know, I conventionally make my habit.

TRACHTENBERG: July 24, 2008

End of Side 2